

MOUNTAIN LION MANAGEMENT

Mountain lions have always been a part of the wildlife mix in many Western states, following a similar timeline that includes much reduced populations after settlement, then gradually increasing numbers over the last 50 years.

North Dakota was part of that early mix as well, until mountain lions were eliminated from the state by the early 1900s. Except for the infrequent transient, mountain lions did not occur in North Dakota for the better part of the last 100 years.

Starting in about 1990, mountain lion sightings became more frequent. At the most recent turnover in centuries, Game and Fish Department biologists suspected, but had not yet documented, that a few mountain lions had taken up residence in the state. This was a rather remarkable development, considering the big cats had not had a consistent presence in North Dakota for more than a hundred years.

The simple theory is that mountain lions recolonized much of South Dakota's Black Hills and neighboring areas in Montana and Wyoming. New generations looking for their own space have ventured out and discovered relatively suitable habitat in North Dakota's badlands.

Two years ago, Game and Fish Department biologists believed enough lions were living in the state to justify a limited experimental hunting season that would help gather data on lions. It was a hunting season that generated considerable input, both for and against. Some people

don't want any mountain lions killed. Some people want them all killed.

From the Game and Fish Department's perspective, the first season accomplished its objective. All five mountain lions allowed were taken after deer gun season opened in November, and all were killed in what was considered typical lion habitat in the northern badlands.

For fall 2006 the Department established a second experimental season, anticipating similar results. That was not the case. The quota of five lions was reached in early November, before deer season even started. Only one of the lions was taken in the badlands. Two were taken by pheasant hunters east of the Missouri River, and another was hit by a vehicle east of the Missouri.

This was an unexpected development and biologists are still uncertain whether the appearance of so many lions outside of typical lion habitat is just a coincidence, or a pattern that will continue to evolve.

In the last 18 months, since the first experimental season started in September 2005, a minimum of 12 mountain lions have been killed in North Dakota. Besides those taken during the time the two hunting seasons were open, one was killed at a farmstead during summer 2006. Another had to be put down after it was found in a trap meant to catch bobcats.

In addition, a second lion was discovered caught in a foothold trap, but it was released unharmed after Game and Fish biologists attached a radio-collar so it could be tracked.

Based on information gathered the past two seasons, Game and Fish staff are beginning to formulate plans for 2007 that take into consideration lion presence east of the Missouri, and what appears to be a small but stable breeding population in the badlands.

Judging by comments the Game and Fish Department has received, many people are uncomfortable with large predators randomly roaming the countryside. While throughout the West mountain lion encounters with humans are rare, until just recently, it's not something anyone in North Dakota had to worry about at all.

On the other hand, many other people revere mountain lions and don't think they should be hunted or killed for any reason. The Game and Fish Department is in the middle, trying to manage mountain lions in the best interest of the state, and the species.

Following are samples of public input Game and Fish has received, either directly or through newspaper letters to the editor, regarding mountain lions over the past couple of years, **From Both Sides**.



CRAIG BIRHLE

One Side

• Allowing only five cougars to be shot is not only asinine, but dangerous to the North Dakota public. If an individual would happen to be killed by one of these cats, the North Dakota Game and Fish should be totally held responsible. People are now scared to hunt, go for a walk, do chores and etc ... do your job and get a handle on this serious situation. *(Letter to Game and Fish Department)*

• I am a farmer in eastern North Dakota and am wondering what the rule is regarding the protection of mountain lions in eastern North Dakota. I realize that the season is officially over and it would not be legal to shoot one at this time. However, there have been sightings of one in our area and I am concerned about my kids and my wife, for their safety, as they often go walking after dark or down to feed our horses late in the evening. When is it determined that the safety of family is more important than increasing the population of mountain lions in this area of the state. *(Email to Game and Fish) Editor's Note: North Dakota landowners and other citizens do have the right to kill mountain lions that are causing livestock depredation, or are an immediate threat to personal safety.*

• I, among many others, am wondering why something is not being done about this mountain lion issue ... I do feel threatened by these large, extremely wild cats. My children can no longer play in a coulee close to where a lion was seen because we fear the coulee may be the cat's territory. The very reason I love this area is that there is a better chance of a mountain lion attack than a drive-by shooting. That doesn't mean we shouldn't be doing something about the felines. Something has to be done before the next headline reads "North Dakota Youth Mauled by Mountain Lion." How tragic it will be, and embarrassing as a state, when the inevitable happens and we did nothing in an attempt to prevent it. *(Email to Game and Fish)*

• I was wondering who to talk to when these things kill cattle so I can sue the dumb ... who had the idea to bring these things into the state ... Mountain lions in North Dakota is one of the stupidest things I have ever heard and I do so hope the family of the first person killed (it's going to happen) sues you ... *(Email to Game and Fish)*

• Why isn't the hunting season for mountain lions in North Dakota longer? Five (the season quota) just doesn't make sense to me. Better yet, all ranchers should have the right to shoot any mountain lion on their own property that they deem unsafe to their families or their livestock. I'm all for an open hunting season for mountain lions and I have a sneaking suspicion there are a lot of ranchers out there that are, too. *(Letter to editor)*

The Other Side

• Discontinue the cougar hunting and slaughter. The spotting of a cat in the field is much more exciting and entertaining to outdoorsmen than killing the poor cat. The cats have been no threat to man so why are we declaring war on a few displaced cats. The cats have been living in southwestern North Dakota for years and I have not heard from a rancher that has experienced any problems with them. I am both a rancher and a hunter, and I will continue to keep the cats a secret and will now post my land to protect the cat population from both the public and the N.D. Game and Fish Department. *(Letter to Game and Fish Department)*

• I recently read a Bismarck newspaper article suggesting the hunting of cougars in our badlands. Please do not agree to such a suggestion. Wildlife is a gift to us and I for one will take my chances with cougars while out hiking or biking in the badlands. Our safety cannot and truly should not be guaranteed at all times under every sort of condition. To lose wildlife diminishes our lives, which become predictable, bland, tasteless as store bought tomatoes. Let us grow up and become accountable for our own safety, for our own actions. Wiping out every predator is immoral. *(Letter to governor)*

• I am an avid deer hunter, both bow hunting and gun hunting, I love the outdoors and the North Dakota outdoors. I have never had an issue with the North Dakota Game and Fish Department, until the mountain lion season came up! My question is this – Is there really enough mountain lions in North Dakota to warrant a season? Personally I think the mountain lion is a spectacular animal and I just hope they are not going to be overhunted. I think there is a place for them in North Dakota and I hope to see one some day! *(Letter to Game and Fish)*

• There is also value in simply having these magnificent animals as part of the give and take of nature, whatever their number, not just for study purposes or for a hunting season. I for one would be very excited to get the chance to see a mountain lion in our own North Dakota wilderness. *(Letter to the editor)*

• I would like to ask that you not allow a hunting season in North Dakota for mountain lions. The editorial in today's Bismarck Tribune just confirms for me that a season is not necessary. If our state scientists need something to do, send them to South Dakota to observe the mountain lions killed there. I need someone to explain to me how killing five mountain lions in our state and studying them is going to tell us that they live here permanently or were just passing through. Our society needs to "get over" the idea that you need to kill anything new that passes through our state. Human beings are not the only creatures put on this Earth by our God. We need to share our land with all living creatures. *(Letter to governor)*

What do you think? To pass along your comments, send us an email at ndgf@nd.gov; call us at 701-328-6300; or write North Dakota Game and Fish Department, 100 N. Bismarck Expressway, Bismarck, ND 58501.